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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KATHMANDU 000541

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TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [NP](#) [BH](#) [IN](#)

SUBJECT: BHUTANESE REFUGEES: SOME HOPEFUL SIGNS OF PROGRESS

REF: A. NEW DELHI 1642

- [1](#)B. JOYCE-PITOTTI-KAPLAN EMAILS OF 03/18-19 (NOTAL)
- [1](#)C. KATHMANDU 230
- [1](#)D. 03 KATHMANDU 2501

Classified By: DCM Robert K. Boggs for reasons 1.5 (b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary. The GON has prepared a report on the December incident in Khudunabari Camp and will provide it to the RGOB in April. A UNHCR official confided that the Government of India had requested information from UNHCR on conditions for return faced by the refugees and how these conditions would need to change to meet international standards. The GON has not prohibited UNHCR from conducting a socio-economic survey, but is reluctant to move forward with any plans involving local integration of refugees. UNHCR will initiate the profiling exercise of the refugees as early as mid-May. Refugee leaders are discussing the possibility of a visit to Bhutan, but have no plans to march to Bhutan as mentioned in Ref A. The RGOB's demand for a full investigation into the December incident seems to be merely a ploy to delay the repatriation and verification process. The GON report will likely differ insignificantly from accounts reported Ref C. Perhaps the Department could suggest that the RGOB adopt confidence-building measures, such as permitting a small group of Khudunabari refugees to conduct a "pre-repatriation" visit to Southern Bhutan. End Summary.

Status of GON Investigation into December Incident

[1](#)2. (C) At the request of the Royal Government of Bhutan (RGOB), the Government of Nepal (GON) has prepared a report on the December 22 incident in Khudunabari Camp in a good faith effort to restart the bilateral process. Foreign Ministry Joint Secretary M.K. Bhattarai informed Poloff on March 23 that the report is based on accounts from GON officials present during the incident. Bhattarai added that he prepared the report in such a way as to avoid embarrassing the RGOB and without apportioning blame to any party. The findings will be forwarded to Foreign Minister B.B. Thapa upon his return from abroad o/a March 30, he said. Bhattarai suggested that the GON would convey the report to the RGOB as soon as the first week of April.

GOI Requests Information from UNHCR

[1](#)3. (C/NF) A UNHCR senior protection officer confided to Poloff on March 22 that UNHCR/Nepal recently responded to a request from the Government of India (GOI) for information on the Bhutanese refugees. Specifically, the GOI asked UNHCR to detail the conditions for repatriation as outlined by the RGOB and how these conditions would need to change in order to meet international standards. The UNHCR official indicated that the report was given recently to the GOI. According to the official, the report highlighted the many uncertainties faced by the refugees. For example, in order to regain citizenship, the RGOB has indicated that Category II refugees must not say anything or do anything "against the King, the Government and the People of Bhutan," but has not clarified whether past behavior (e.g., from the 1990-1991 demonstrations) or behavior only during the 2-year probation period will be taken into account. The RGOB has also failed to address what will happen to Category II returnees who fail to regain citizenship. The UNHCR official also asserted that the report emphasized that prior Bhutanese citizenship should not be the definitive condition on which the RGOB bases the right to return. According to international standards, "habitual residence" in the country should be sufficient to qualify for repatriation, she said.

UNHCR: Planning for Socio-Economic Survey Continues

While Profiling Exercise to Begin in May

14. (C) According to UNHCR/Nepal, UNHCR has neither formally requested nor been denied permission by the GON to conduct a socio-economic survey. The purpose of the socio-economic survey is to identify differences between the camps and local Nepali communities regarding access to social services, such as education and health, with an eye to equalizing quality of services in anticipation of local integration of the refugees. Informal conversations between the UNHCR and GON officials have indicated that the GON is reluctant to conduct the survey because of its implications for local integration, which the GON has not agreed formally to address at this time. UNHCR will continue with planning the survey, however, and at some point will submit a proposal to the GON. A UNHCR protection officer opined that the GON likely will not refuse to cooperate with the survey because of the potential benefits to local Nepalis.

15. (SBU) UNHCR's profiling exercise is expected to begin sometime in May (Ref B). According to a UNHCR protection officer, UNHCR/Nepal has requested a "profiling expert" from Geneva and anticipates that he/she will arrive in mid-April. UNHCR has also contracted the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) to train and supervise a team of high school-graduate refugees to collect the profiling data. (Profiling data will include household size, names, ages, types of Bhutanese documentation, last address in Bhutan, education levels, work experience, languages, current earnings (if any), and real estate holding outside Bhutan.) UNHCR anticipates that the 8-person ICMC team will arrive in April, train the data collectors and begin work in the camps in May. Data collection will require 2-3 weeks followed by 2 weeks of data entry. The profiling exercise could be complete by late June. Using this information, UNHCR will initiate individual protection interviews to identify vulnerable groups that might benefit from resettlement abroad.

No Decision by Refugees to March on Bhutan

16. (C) Contrary to reports that the refugees are planning to march into Bhutan in April or May, refugee leader Ratan Gazmere informed PolOff that no decision has been made. He added, however, that the refugee leaders have discussed the possibility of a "pre-repatriation" visit, for which they would request permission from the RGOB. Gazmere suggested that one member from each family in Khudunabari Camp of Categories I and II would travel to Bhutan to visit their home district to alleviate some of their concerns and to witness for themselves whether they would be able to return to their own lands and property. PolOff recommended that such a large group might intimidate the RGOB and that perhaps one or two representatives to travel to each of the six districts would be a more manageable and acceptable size. Gazmere confirmed that refugee leader Tek Nath Rizal is preparing to conduct an indefinite hunger strike, but has not decided on the date. The two of them hope to travel to the upcoming UNCHR meeting in Geneva to raise awareness of the refugee issue with attendees and to press for a resolution on Bhutan, he said. Rizal's hunger strike would occur only after his return to Nepal.

Comment

17. (C) By demanding a full investigation into the December incident -- which all first-hand observers except, perhaps, Bhutanese officials concur was a spontaneous reaction on the part of the refugees to very harsh and provocative statements by RGOB officials -- the RGOB appears to be trying to delay repatriation and forestall further verification of the remaining camps. The GON report, based on government officials' eyewitness accounts, is unlikely to differ substantially from information received during meetings with UNHCR and GON officials in January (Ref C). It is unclear whether the RGOB will persist in its initial insistence that the guilty (i.e., refugees, in the Bhutanese view) be punished as well. A visit by a small group of Khudunabari Camp refugees to the six home districts in Southern Bhutan, approved by the RGOB, could go far to alleviate the uncertainties regarding repatriation faced by the refugees. Post recommends that the Department encourage the RGOB, as a sign of goodwill and to build confidence between the two parties, to allow a group of refugees to visit Bhutan. Firsthand exposure to conditions for return would help both to remove refugees' uncertainties regarding repatriation and to clarify the intentions of the Bhutanese government. However, such a visit would not necessarily reassure the refugees or pave the way for a mass repatriation. End Comment.

